



Dana E. Blackwell
Executive Director

LOS ANGELES COUNTY COMMISSION FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

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ADELINA SORKIN, VICE CHAIR
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STACEY F. WINKLER

APPROVED MINUTES

The General Meeting of the Commission for Children and Families was held on Monday, **January 9, 2006**, in room 739 of the Kenneth Hahn Hall of Administration, 500 West Temple Street, Los Angeles. **Please note that these minutes are intended as a summary and not as a verbatim transcription of events at this meeting.**

COMMISSIONERS PRESENT (Quorum Established)

Carol O. Biondi
Patricia Curry
Ann E. Franzen
Susan F. Friedman
Helen A. Kleinberg
Daisy Ma
Dr. La-Doris McClaney
Rev. Cecil L. Murray
Wendy L. Ramallo
Adelina Sorkin

COMMISSIONERS ABSENT (Excused/Unexcused)

Hon. Joyce Fahey
Sandra Rudnick
Dr. Harriette F. Williams
Stacey F. Winkler
Jason Anderson, youth representative

YOUTH REPRESENTATIVE

William Johnson

APPROVAL OF THE AGENDA

The agenda for the January 9, 2006, meeting was unanimously approved.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

The minutes of the December 5, 2005, general meeting were unanimously approved.

CHAIR'S REPORT

- Chair Kleinberg wished everyone a happy new year and thanked Carol Biondi again for hosting the Commission's holiday party in December.
- Commissioner Franzen moved that the final draft of the Commission's brochure be adopted; Commissioner Murray seconded the motion, and it was unanimously approved.

DIRECTOR'S REPORT

- The department is working with the Chief Administrative Office on a request for additional funding to expand the concurrent planning redesign from its five-office pilot across the department, to double the size of the Permanency Partners Program (P3), and to expand team decision-making (TDM) so that meetings take place at detention, at 30 days, at four months, at nine months, and at every disruption in placement. This request should be submitted sometime in February.

Chair Kleinberg worried that children in long-term care whose behavior does not trigger a placement disruption would miss out on more frequent TDMs. Lisa Parrish explained that a common element in plans to reduce the number of children in long-term foster care is the regional placement review team, which uses a similar approach to TDM and reviews cases on a regular cycle.

Commissioner Ramallo urged the department to seek further dollars to fund the results of the joint planning to be started this month between DCFS and the Probation Department, to ensure that children who move from the dependency to the delinquency systems continue to receive the support they need once they leave Probation placements. According to Commissioner Biondi, 41 percent of the children placed in Probation group homes come from the dependency system, and she estimated that number to be at least 30 percent in the Probation Department overall. Departments are dealing with the same children, funded by the same IV-E funding stream—joint planning and services are essential. A task force studying runaways, for example, is not looking at the 600 youth missing from Probation group homes. Commissioner Biondi has heard that runaway youths' Medi-Cal is immediately stopped (preventing any tracking through prescriptions filled), and would like to find out if this is true.

- The state has released its quarterly performance measure report, which shows Los Angeles County doing significantly better than the rest of the state in many areas. Three categories have improved but still need work: the percentage of children reunified within one year, the percentage of children adopted within two years of placement, and the abuse rate in foster care (which has come down more than 30 percent over the last couple of years). The report may be available on the U.C. Berkeley website, and Dr. Sanders will make sure that the Commission office receives a copy.

Commissioner Curry would like to see the department collect data on adoptions that fail. Commissioner McClaney asked about sibling placement, and Dr. Sanders said that the quarterly reports track children being placed with at least one other siblings, and in full sibling groups.

Vice Chair Sorkin asked about the growing number of Latino children in the system, now about 47 percent. Are there concerns about the department's keeping pace with that population, providing meaningful reunification services, for instance, to monolingual Spanish-speaking parents? Human service directors from the southern counties discussed this topic at their last meeting, Dr. Sanders said; it is a clear concern of his, though numbers differ greatly from county to county. Commissioner Ramallo recommended tracking the kinds of incidents occurring with these families, what communities they are coming from, and what patterns appear, to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the department's approach. Chair Kleinberg suggested asking regional administrators to present to the Commission the specific problems they are seeing.

GROUP HOME REPORT

The Group Home Work Group, which has met every three weeks since April 2005, is a collaboration among the Department of Children and Family Services, the Probation Department, the Department of Mental Health, and provider agencies. Parents and former foster youth also attend meetings, as does Ms. Blackwell for the Commission. Lisa Parrish distributed the group's vision statement, "Foundation for Los Angeles County's Utilization of Residentially-Based Services for Children," and reviewed a fact sheet and corresponding data tables that responded to previous questions from Commissioners about group-home services. (A task force on group home performance measures meets monthly and is working on data definitions, a preliminary data analysis of the performance-based contracts, and other issues. It will report to the Commission at a later time.)

The 145 agencies that contract with the county provide group-home services at approximately 300 facilities, but no beds are exclusively contracted for the Department of Mental Health (a correction from the hand-out). By contrast to the number of Los Angeles County children in group homes (1,798 from DCFS and 1,295 from Probation), the state of Illinois reduced its group-home population to 1,683 as of June 2004, and the city of New York had about 2,700 dependency children and 800 delinquency children in group homes—though fewer children in placement overall—at around the same time. Illinois also has approximately 4,000 intensive-treatment foster-care beds, an approach only now being developed in Los Angeles County with Mental Health Services Act dollars.

The department is making a strong effort not to place children 12 years and younger in residential care, and that number has fallen substantially, to between 360 and 370 (a 'group home' for younger children can be as few as four or five beds). Ms. Parrish will augment Table 4, which shows the number of children placed in their current group home by length of stay, with statistics showing children's total length of stay.

The numbers of re-placements to higher and lower levels of care have been about even, showing that those transitions have not been as effective as hoped. The institution of the standardized Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths (CANS) assessment tool should help in that regard. Ms. Parrish explained that all nine staff in the resource utilization management (RUM) unit will be trained to use CANS during the last week of January. As of February 1, all DCFS children proposed for entry into group homes and all children moving out of group homes (for reunification or relative placement) will be assessed using that tool. The Probation Department, however, will not use the same method.

Commissioner Ramallo again expressed concerns about investing resources with only one department, urging the use of the same professional approach with all children. Commissioner Biondi agreed that communication between departments is critical. As DCFS moves away from using group homes, facilities are closing before the Probation Department has a chance to look at placing children there who are now inappropriately sent to camps and other locked facilities. Another grave situation exists in the juvenile halls with children (mostly from the dependency system) who are seriously emotionally disturbed; staff are not trained to handle them, and they are being criminalized. These are children who were 12 or 13 years old when MacLaren Children's Center closed, Commissioner Biondi said, and now they're in jail. Resources must be developed for them.

According to David Leone, the Probation Department has established placement assessment centers at Boys Republic and Rancho San Antonio—a total of 20 beds—where youth receive 30 days of psychiatric and family assessment that will help match them better with placements. Starting in late July 2006, children 14 and under who would normally go to camp will begin being diverted to other placements, though this applies only to youth new to the system, not to the 4,000 already incarcerated.

For children, the ramifications of appearing before a delinquency judge without adequate assessment or planning can be grave. If they are put somewhere they are going to fail, the next time they may be sent to camp, and then possibly tried as an adult. Placement recommendations to judges are often made without home visits or examining a child's dependency history, Commissioner Ramallo said, and that is unacceptable.

Citing discussions in many venues about assessments and their funding, Commissioner Curry recommended that the county develop a procedure enabling assessments to follow children from department to department and to Transition Resource Centers once they are ready to emancipate. Then, rather than young people being endlessly assessed by each separate system they enter, money can be spent on actually helping them. Vice Chair Sorkin suggested that the New Directions Task Force be asked to look at common training and assessments for DCFS, Probation, and DMH, and Dr. Sanders said he would be happy to raise the issue there. Although the same children are involved, he was not sure there was a way to ensure a common approach across departments, since the issues are much more complex than the assessment piece.

Chair Kleinberg asked about DCFS's responsibility to its children if they become embroiled in the juvenile justice system. Should assessments be passed on? Should the

social worker talk to the child and appear at the juvenile court hearing? Should the DCFS treatment approach be communicated? Commissioner Curry recalled a Commission recommendation from years ago that Los Angeles County follow Alameda County's lead in maintaining a single file for each individual child so that everyone dealing with that child knows what's going on.

Commissioner Biondi asked if there is a relationship between the increasing numbers of children and the new performance-based contracts. From the audience, a member of the Probation Commission said that one reason numbers were growing was that the department was getting better at tracking them. As a result of several pieces of legislation, Probation is working more closely with DCFS to share information on 'crossover' kids. The information in the fact sheet on group homes housing both delinquency and dependency children comes not from the CWS/CMS system but from a monthly report of vacancies and waiting lists collected by DCFS's out-of-home care management division.

On December 12, a residential summit was held for 240 county and stakeholder staff to discuss how to better work together. Breakout groups addressed collaboration between the public and private sectors, improving family involvement, safety and well-being, and staff development. Attendees agreed that children could benefit from being placed in group homes if they exhibit 'barrier behaviors' (those that prevent them from being able to take care of themselves or live in the community safely) and if the program can offer treatment efficacy (to work on those behaviors and focus on permanency). Children's functioning within their environment must be examined; they should not have to 'fail up' to enter residential treatment.

The corresponding book-end to assessment, of course, is knowing what programs have to offer. A tremendous range of residential services has historically been available, some very effective, and some taking more of a custodial role. The Department of Mental Health is looking at facilities' treatment components with an eye to redesigning them for the current population. Paul McIver expressed DMH's support for the DCFS move from group-home placements to community-based care, and for the Probation Department's development of placement alternatives in group homes and in the community.

Children under the age of 12 who are in long-term foster care are not presently involved in the P3 program, which was originally designed to focus on older children. Prior to the closure of the residential program at Hollygrove, kin were found for just about every youngster. Ten Federally funded pilot demonstration projects have been very successful in finding family members, but the art is connecting those relatives in positive ways with youngsters. In answer to a question from Commissioner Ma, Ms. Parrish explained that of the 26 Hollygrove children who returned to the home of a parent, relative, or non related extended family member, most had been enrolled in wraparound services, and only one had been returned (from placement with an uncle) to a group home. Overall, despite the wraparound services they received, five Hollygrove children have been replaced in group homes, indicating that transition supports for children moving from institutional placements need to improve. Hollygrove had only 60 days to arrange homes,

instead of a more realistic six months. The agency has received a grant to continue to use its mental health staff to work with 26 of its former residents, now placed in foster homes or other group-home placements, to provide family resources and outpatient services. Though agencies such as Hollygrove are withdrawing from residential care, management issues and other reasons beyond the lowering of referrals are factors that contribute to these closures, Commissioner Curry said.

Chair Kleinberg suggested that the Commission hear further about mental health services available to children in group homes, and what communication about that treatment occurs with families, caregivers, and the children themselves. A consistent mental health program needs to be designed, as well as a consistent educational piece.

TEAM DECISION-MAKING

Team decision-making is one of four core strategies in the Annie E. Casey's Family to Family program, which the department has been incorporating since the late 1990s. Team decision-making (TDM) meetings pull together family members and concerned professionals to make determinations about children's lives at three junctures: when the child is first considered for removal from the family, at any re-placement, and at reunification. Permanency planning conferences also occur at the 30-day, four-month, and nine-month marks, and a multidisciplinary assessment team also reviews the case at 30 or 45 days.

Michael Rauso reviewed TDM statistics for the period September 1 through December 31, 2005, cautioning that because the tracking database is new, numbers may not have been entered consistently. During that time, 1,254 TDMs were held, 780 of those for imminent risk (possible removal), 111 for emergency placement (command-post referrals during evenings and weekends), 242 for placement moves, and 121 for reunification. Though one concern about TDM is that it makes decisions about children's lives whether or not their families are involved, families seem to like the process and want to be engaged. Eighty-five percent of imminent-risk TDMs have birth families in attendance, and 54 percent have extended family there. Eighty percent of emergency-placement TDMs have birth families coming, as do over half of placement-move TDMs and 82 percent of reunification TDMs.

Of the imminent-risk TDMs held during that period, 357 children were able to stay at home. Placement-move TDMs boasted a 'save rate' (meaning that extra supports allow the child to stay in his or her current placement) just shy of 60 percent, and reunification TDMs returned children to their families 48 percent of the time. Of the 145 children removed from their homes during that four-month period, 57 percent went to relatives, 10 percent to nonrelative family members, and 11 percent into foster-care placements.

Team decision-making is not replacing family group decision-making, and the department is working on using TDM to evaluate long-term cases. Though it is not used at Metropolitan State Hospital or other psychiatric facilities, it is used in group homes.

Since the numbers of children going to relatives is about the same as it was before the implementation of TDM, the department is beginning to track the number returned to

foster care, any subsequent reabuse, and other factors. It is working with U.C. Berkeley to get preliminary data on the stability of TDM's placement decisions within the next six months.

Parents often feel unable to get the services they need, especially under the tight time-frames that TDM dictates. Though program managers are working on linking parents with adult services—doing so is now the social workers' responsibility—Chair Kleinberg recommended establishing a parent advocacy program to make sure that parents are helped toward their goals. That model has been successful in New York and Illinois, reducing the time required from caseworkers and lawyers involved. Mr. Rauso has written a proposal for peer-to-peer parent partners, which he agreed would be a very positive step. He is meeting this evening with Casey consultants to discuss that as well as the establishment of a system of regionally based parent councils.

PUBLIC COMMENT

There was no public comment.

MEETING ADJOURNED